

May 2, 2010 Fifth Sunday of Easter

The Rev. Canon Joye Q. Cantrell

They say that confession is good for the soul so I have a confession to make. I am an extremely picky eater. The two most prominent things that I do not eat are grits and hamburgers. Some of my friends actually question my Southern origins-a good southern girl that doesn't eat grits and an American girl that doesn't eat hamburgers.

There is a book that I used to like to read to my children about not liking to eat certain things. Dr. Seuss's Green Eggs and Ham. Reading from it: "I do not like green eggs and ham. I will not eat them in a boat, I will not eat them with a goat. I will not eat them here or there. I will not eat them anywhere....I do not like them, Sam-I-Am." This story has appealed to picky eaters in America since it first came out. We are fortunate to live in a country with so much food to eat that we can be picky about it.

In today's reading from the Book of Acts we find the story of Peter being forced to come to terms with what food is clean or unclean. This episode is not about a picky eater it is indeed a pivotal event in the Book of Acts. It is an event that would finally determine the identity and character of the early church.

The question was who would be in the church? The circumcised ones, the devout Jews who are living under the purity laws that have always guided their lives felt that anyone wanting to join the church must become Jewish first. God had told his people to make a distinction between clean and

unclean animals. The distinctions were/are clearly spelled out for them in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Making these distinctions was what held the community together as a people through the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile in Babylon, and all the pressure under the Roman occupation to assimilate. In Israel today restaurants are kosher and clearly tell you if they serve meat or dairy. Every time an orthodox Jew eats they are reminded of who they are.

The core beliefs that had shaped Peter's life since earliest childhood were being challenged. How could God simply overturn the clear commandments of the scripture?

Well, it took a trance, two visions, angels and the Holy Spirit to lead Peter to a new way of thinking. One day, a Roman centurion named Cornelius, a Gentile who worshiped the God of Israel, had a vision to which an angel told him to send some of his men to Joppa to find Peter. The next day Peter, while waiting for his lunch to be prepared fell into a trance and had the vision we just heard described. As the vision faded and he sat there wondering what to make of it, Cornelius's three men showed up and asked Peter to go with them to Cornelius's house. Peter was in for quite a surprise because Cornelius had invited all his relatives-so Peter not only had to enter a Gentile's unclean house but had to fraternize with this Gentile's whole family.

By this time, Peter is beginning to catch on that his vision may not be about food at all but about people. He says to Cornelius's family, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile; but

God has shown me that I must not call anyone profane or unclean.” Peter then tells this household the story of Jesus and his death and resurrection, and about the forgiveness of sins available to anyone who believes in him. Then, astoundingly, before he can even finish speaking, the Holy Spirit falls on everyone there, so there is nothing else for Peter to do but to baptize every last one of them.

Peter had a lot of explaining to do to the community back in Jerusalem. He told them about his vision and the ensuing events and the conclusion he had drawn from the whole bewildering episode. “The spirit told me...not to make a distinction between them and us and who was I that I could hinder God?”

Please my brothers and sisters understand what a critical and pivotal event this was. In Jesus Christ, God had broken open the ancient covenant with Israel so that Gentiles, pagans, and unclean people could come in too. God was opening the borders. The spirit told Peter “not to make a distinction” between the recognized people of God the Jews and the gentiles. pause

If we scratch beneath the surface of today’s problems in the church and in the world don’t we find the same questions being asked today? We have rules, just like Peter and the Jews had rules. We have rules about who can come to the Table, and what you have to do to become a member of the church or have your baby baptized. In the church, we make distinctions all the times.

We live in a world of distinctions. Some of them seem sensible and helpful. People with good grades get into better schools; people who work harder deserve to get promoted. But some distinctions we make are more harmful than helpful, and not all are reasonable. We might not use the categories clean or unclean to describe people on either side of the boundaries we set but our society has its implicit purity codes, its own ideas about who is in or out. Depending on your orientation, the unclean might be illegal immigrants, gays and lesbians, Muslims, Democrats, Republicans those who speak in tongues or those that sleep on the streets.

But God makes no distinctions. God shows no partiality. That became a central affirmation of the early Christian movement. I would go so far as to say that is a large part of why the gospel still holds such power. Paul said, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” All have sinned, and all have access to the overwhelming grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. The church of Jesus Christ is where the old boundaries are broken, and if you insist on maintaining them at all cost, as Peter said, you could be hindering God.

My prayer for us this morning and every morning is that the Holy Spirit will be at work among us to challenge the boundaries we think are fixed---- so that our sense of propriety is offended and that we might learn to make no distinctions lest we get in the way of the Spirit.